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ABSTRACT

The psychological effects of perceived lack of control have been extensively investigated. This study was conducted to examine a compensatory control strategy called boundary expansion. Boundary expansion is exhibited in social interactions where control needs are directed toward influencing others' views on a particular subject. Boundary expansion consists of attempts to shift the discussion from an examination of particulars to generalizations about the larger implications of the topic in question. Pairs of subjects (N=36) discussed a topic under conditions which were either favorable or unfavorable to the exercise of social influence. It was hypothesized that, when social influence outcomes posed a threat to subjects' sense of control, they would seek to restore control by expanding the boundaries of the topic being discussed. Measures of subjects' self-perceived influence outcomes (success versus failure) and their attributions for those outcomes jointly predicted their use of boundary expansion. This finding supports an hydraulic model of control processes in social influence, which specifies that inability to exert active control leads to adoption of subjectively-based control strategies. Boundary expansion appears to be a salient control strategy in the realm of social influence. (Author/NB)

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# "Boundary Expansion" and Social Influence as Alternative Modes of Control

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## Abstract

Pairs of subjects discussed a topic under conditions which were either favorable or unfavorable to the exercise of social influence. It was hypothesized that, when social influence outcomes posed a threat to subjects' sense of control, they would seek to restore control by expanding the boundaries of the topic -- i.e., by discussing its larger social significance. Measures of subjects' self-perceived influence outcomes (success vs. failure) and their attributions for those outcomes (self-implicating vs. no) jointly predicted their use of boundary expansion. This finding supports an hydraulic model of control processes in social influence.

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The psychological effects of perceived lack of control have been extensively investigated (e.g., Glass & Singer, 1972; Langer, 1983; Lefcourt, 1980; Pittman & Pittman, 1980; Seligman, 1975). Traditionally, "control" has been conceptualized as the ability to actively influence one's environment. Recently, John Weisz and Fred Rothbaum and their colleagues (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984) have focused attention on more subjectively-based strategies of exerting control. Their analysis suggests an hydraulic model of control processes, whereby these other strategies are invoked when active influence cannot be attained.

In the present study, I investigated a compensatory control strategy which I have labelled "boundary expansion." This form of control is exhibited in social interaction where control needs are directed toward influencing others' views on a particular subject. Boundary expansion consists of attempts to shift the discussion from an examination of particulars (e.g., concrete cases) to generalizations about the "larger implications" of the topic in question. For example, discussion of a particular criminal act would be transformed into a lecture on criminality, the current crime wave, the nature of the criminal mind, etc. Boundary expansion satisfies control needs by signifying (to self and others) that the <u>general domain</u> of which this case is an exemplar lies within the discussant's control. In addition, it amplifies the significance of the discussant's subsequent remarks.

A role-play study conducted earlier had provided evidence of use of this boundary expansion strategy (Earle, 1986). Here,

boundary expansion was expected to occur in a "live" discussion situation where attempts to influence another's views on a discussion topic were not successful. In the real world, influence attempts may succeed or fail due to a combination of (a) situational factors (e.g., status differences between the participants), and (b) personal qualities of the discussants, including intelligence, knowledge, social skills, etc., that influence their task effectiveness (cf. Heider, 1958; Rotter, 1966; Weiner et al., 1972). A success that is attributed to (b) or a failure attributed to (a) should not trigger boundary expansion; a success due to (a) or a failure due to (b) should activate such a compensatory control strategy. It is assumed here that attributing success or failure to the target of influence (the discussion partner) is equivalent to self-attribution, since the self is strongly implicated in the partner's degree of responsiveness (cf. Fiske & Taylor, 1984).

To test these predictions, pairs of subjects discussed a topic under conditions that varied the degree of situational constraints on influence success. The principal dependent measure was subjects' use of boundary expansion in their post-discussion essays on the topic.

## Methods

Subjects (8 male and 28 female college freshmen) were asked to read the summary of a case involving a college student ("Bill X") who had gone to a bar with a friend, become intoxicated, and started to drive home. On the way, his car collided with another

vehicle whose driver had run a stop sign. Bill's fraternity had taken a strong public stand against drunk driving. Subjects would be asked to resolve the question: "Should Bill be expelled from the fraternity?"

In preparation for subjects' discussion of this question, they were assigned to defend opposite sides on the issue of expelling Bill X. A coin toss determined which subject got to choose the position he/she wished to defend; the loser was assigned to the opposing position by default (only the former group were included in the data analysis reported below).

Subjects then drew role instructions for the discussion. Subjects in the initiator role had sole authority to introduoe new ideas and new arguments into the discussion. Subjects in the reciprocator role were instructed to exchange ideas freely in an equal, "give-and-take" fashion with the other subject (who was also a reciprocator). Respondent subjects were told that they could merely respond to what their partner (an initiator) said.

Subjects then spent 10 minutes discussing the case of Bill X. E was not present during the discussion. Immediately following the discussion, subjects wrote a followup essay stating their views on the case of Bill X. They then completed a 4-page questionnaire which probed their reactions to the experimental situation. Subjects were debriefed and paid $5 for their time.

## Results

The role manipulation was designed to yield a reasonable distribution of attributions (internal vs. external) for

subjects' social influence outcomes. This objective was accomplished, as may be seen by examining the cell n's in Table 1. However, subjects' self-ratings of influence success/failure were asymmetrically distributed; only 9 subjects reported attaining a degree of influence over their partner's views that matched or exceeded their aspirations (these items were measured on separate 9-point scales).

Subjects' use of a boundary expansion strategy as a means of restoring control was measured by an analysis of their post-discussion essays. Boundary expansion scores were compiled for each subject, based on the number of sentences that either (a) argued that the case of Bill X will/should have a larger impact on others beside the immediate participants, or (b) brought in the larger problem of drunk driving in some way. Essays were independently rated by the author and a naive rater ($r_I$=.80); discrepancies were resolved by using the naive rater's judgment.

To test the predictions set forth above, a 2 X 2 least squares ANOVA was performed on subjects' boundary expansion scores, with their self-ratings of influence outcome (success vs. failure) and their attributions for that outcome (self/partner vs. assigned role) as predictors. This yielded the predicted Outcome X Attribution interaction, $F(1,32) = 4.81$, $p < .04$ (see Table 1). Unbalanced data precluded an examination of main effects here (cf. Appelbaum & Cramer, 1974). Contrasts between cell means (Scheffe method) yielded no significant differences.

## Discussion

Subjects whose ability to influence another's views on an important topic was called into question reacted by emphasizing the broader implications of the topic. As predicted, this effect was a joint product of subjects' self-perceived influence success vs. failure and their attributions for those outcomes. This finding is consistent with an hydraulic model of control processes, which specifies that inability to exert active (here, interpersonal) control leads to adoption of subjectively-based control strategies. Boundary expansion appears to be a salient control strategy in the realm of social influence.

If this finding is supported by future research, it would have important implications for social influence processes. It suggests that the perception of active control capability mediates the level at which important topics are addressed. This in turn may influence (a) the adequacy with which concrete problems are addressed by solutions that are appropriately specific, and (b) the probability of reconciliation between disputing parties (by determining whether disputed topics are addressed at high vs. low levels of generalization). For example, recent research suggests that political leaders' beliefs about their own control capabilities may be reflected in the rhetorical level at which they address key political questions (Hermann, 1983).

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Table 1

Use of Boundary Expansion as a Function of Influence Outcome and Attribution for Influence Outcome

| | Influence outcome | |
|---|---|---|
| Attribution for outcome | Success | Failure |
| Self/partner | 0.66 (6) | 3.00 (15) |
| Assigned role | 3.66 (3) | 2.08 (12) |

Note. The values represent the mean number of sentences in subjects' post-discussion essays that exhibited boundary expansion. Cell sizes are indicated in parentheses.